

BACKYARD HABITAT FOR BIRDS, BUTTERFLIES, DRAGONFLIES . . .

A Guide for Landowners and Communities in New Jersey
by Patricia Sutton

Each autumn millions of coastal migrants arrive in New Jersey. Many have traveled thousands of miles and have thousands more to go before reaching their wintering ground. For many making their first autumn migration, it will be the last. The mortality rate for first time migrants is greater than 50% for some species. Their needs are basic: food, water, and a safe (from predators and weather) place to forage and rest. For thousands of years migrants have relied on **NATIVE VEGETATION**. As stewards of our land, we can insure that these birds find favorable habitat wherever the autumn winds push them. The vegetation we choose to plant or protect from the bulldozer will not only benefit migrants, but also nesting and wintering birds, butterflies and moths, and other animals year-round.

BASIC FACTS ABOUT BACKYARD HABITAT:

1. New Jersey, the most densely populated state in the nation, is still growing. Farmlands and woodlots, so important to wildlife, are lost daily to development. **WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!** Our backyards and community open space areas are increasingly important to wildlife year-round. They can be planned and planted with wildlife in mind.
2. **NATIVE TREES, SHRUBS, VINES, WILDFLOWERS, and (even) WEEDS** are the key to successful backyard habitats, offering critical food and cover to our wildlife.
 - a. Native vegetation will thrive with the least amount of care. Non-native ornamentals require a great deal of care (excessive water and fertilizer just to stay alive) and tend **NOT** to thrive as readily as native vegetation. This should be a prime consideration with successive drought years and water shortage problems.
 - b. If an area is left alone (not mowed, left brushy), native trees, shrubs, and vines will appear on their own – planted by the birds (as seeds of the wild berries, seeds, cones, and catkins pass through their system). As these untended areas evolve, they are beneficial in all stages of growth. Even early on, brushy areas offer important cover and food.
 - c. Many native trees, shrubs, and vines are ornamental and aesthetically pleasing, bearing fruits and flowers at various times of the year. When choosing an ornamental planting, also consider its value to wildlife. Many non-native ornamentals have **NO** food value to our wildlife.
 - d. The proliferation of sod and decorative stone lawns in our coastal communities is endangering our wildlife. Migrant birds concentrate along the coast, due to prevailing northwest winds. Many are blown out to sea. The lucky ones fight their way back to land against strong headwinds, arrive exhausted and starving only to find these sterile habitats devoid of food and cover. The sod and stone lawns are thought to be trouble free, yet they require constant watering or chemical maintenance. A truly trouble-free backyard would be one planted in native vegetation. Our coastal plain was once rich with dune forests of bayberry, beach plum, American holly, black cherry, red cedar . . ., all extremely beneficial to wildlife. The sandy soil is still there, beneath these sterile habitats. Consider planting the vegetation that once grew in abundance on the coastal plain.

3. A successful backyard habitat provides **FOOD, SHELTER / COVER, and WATER.**

- a. If planting, choose a variety of native trees, shrubs, and vines with different flowering and fruiting periods to provide **FOOD** (nuts, berries, buds, catkins, fruits, nectar, seeds...) at different times of the year. See Pat Sutton's list of "New Jersey's Native Trees, Shrubs & Vines That are Beneficial to Birds."
- b. Insects are an important **FOOD** source for wildlife. For example, Black Cherry, a tree whose fruits are eaten by 53 birds, also attracts countless warblers that feed on the insects attracted to the fruits in the fall and the flowers in the spring. Doug Tallamy (author of *Bringing Nature Home*) shares that 456 butterflies and moths lay their eggs on Black Cherry leaves. Insect-eating birds (like warblers) survive by feeding on these caterpillars. Birds play a significant role in regulating insect populations. Most birds feed insects to their young, and species like swallows, flycatchers, and woodpeckers eat insects throughout their lifetime. **AVOID THE USE OF INSECTICIDES** and insure a safe area for wildlife and your own family. "Bug Lights" eliminate many of the beneficial insects that pollinate our plants and feed on nuisance insects. Rather than use a bug light, place a bat house in your yard. Bats play a major role in controlling night-flying insects. One bat can catch up to 600 or more mosquitos in an hour.
- c. The article "How to Create a Butterfly and Hummingbird Garden" and a list of "Recommended Plantings to Attract Hummingbirds, Butterflies, and Moths" (which includes a variety of perennials and annuals that provide **NECTAR FOR BUTTERFLIES AND HUMMINGBIRDS** and important **CATERPILLAR FOOD PLANTS** for butterflies & moths), both by Patricia Sutton, can be found on NJ Audubon's website at:
<http://www.njaudubon.org/SectionBackyardHabitat/CreateaGarden.aspx>
<http://www.njaudubon.org/SectionBackyardHabitat/RecommendedNectarPlants.aspx>
- d. **FEEDERS** can compliment a backyard habitat by providing sunflower, thistle, millet, suet, and fruit in winter when birds are stressed and a sugar-water solution for hummingbirds in summer.
- e. A brush pile can be placed near winter feeders to offer important **COVER** from predators (use discarded Xmas trees). Small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and insects will also benefit.
- f. Evergreen trees provide **COVER** year-round, and are heavily used as nest sites and to escape from predators and bad weather. Evergreens that also provide an important food source to birds and wildlife include: Red Cedar, American Holly, and some pines.
- g. Brushy thickets (densely planted shrubs or overgrown areas) provide a **PROTECTED PLACE** for birds and small mammals to hide from predators and to nest.
- h. **Dead or hollow trees are important** to hole-nesting birds (woodpeckers, bluebirds, screech owls, chickadees) and animals (flying squirrels, raccoons). Leave them standing (unless they are potentially dangerous) to provide **CAVITIES for NESTING and ROOSTING, SHELTER** in winter, as well as food (insects) to certain species. **NEST BOXES** will also benefit hole-nesting birds.
- i. Bird baths provide drinking & bathing **WATER**. Use a heated bird bath in winter. Misters add movement (as the water drips down through branches into bird baths below) and will draw in even more bird activity.
- j. **WATER** – Pre-formed ponds make great wildlife / dragonfly ponds! Add driftwood so birds have a perch and can easily drink and bath. Plant native Pickerelweed and White Water Lilies in the pond and watch dragonflies lay their eggs on it, while frogs and damselflies use the lily pads as perches.
- k. **WINDOW KILLS** – If birds have flown into some of your windows and died, it is because the window reflects the out-of-doors too well as songbirds flush in panic from a predator like a hawk. Prevent this by hanging a 2' long strand of wide white ribbon over the outside of the window. As it dangles over the glass, it breaks up the reflection of your yard. You can also place post it notes on the outside of the window to further break up the reflection.